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AUTHOR Williams, Geoffrey J.
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ABSTRACT

This conference reviewed the past and likely future impact of advances in the technology of communications on the Commonwealth and the countries of the Commonwealth. There is potential gain in terms of economic development from the leap-frogging of technologies, but there is not a lot of optimism that the new technology will help to narrow the gap between developing and developed countries. Applications of new technology in education have been less effective than in the business world. It is in the media that some of the most significant impacts have occurred, as exemplified by the collapse of the Eastern bloc, which, as portrayed by the media, has been an example for change in other countries. Messages the world receives through the media are currently coming largely from the West, but the growing economic strength of the Asian Pacific countries, few of which are in the Commonwealth, could bring about a change of focus. Improved communications technology could strengthen Commonwealth links. It is recommended that freedom of information be added to the Declaration of Commonwealth Principles. (Author/SLD)

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Changing Communications for a Closer Commonwealth? June 1993

St. Catherine's Conference Report #38
June 1993

Dr. G.J. Williams
Cumberland Lodge
The Great Park
Windsor
Berkshire SL4 2HP

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CHANGING COMMUNICATIONS FOR A CLOSER COMMONWEALTH?

A ST CATHARINE'S CONFERENCE HELD AT CUMBERLAND LODGE JUNE 1993

St Catharine's Conference Report No. 38

St Catharine's Conferences are an important part of the work of the King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Foundation of St Catharine's and focus on a variety of contemporary issues.

This conference was concerned with the revolutionary changes which are taking place in the technology of communications and how they might influence particular areas of Commonwealth concern — education, business, culture and political processes. Would they contribute to widening the gap between the developed and developing countries, or might they be harnessed in the development of a closer Commonwealth relationship?

Summary

The conference reviewed the past and likely future impact of advances in the technology of communications on the Commonwealth and the countries of the Commonwealth.

In terms of economic development there is potential gain from the leap-frogging of technologies, but not a lot of optimism that the new technology will help to narrow the gap between developing and developed countries. Applications of the new communications technology in education has been less effective than in the business world. It is in the media that some of the most significant impacts have occurred, with notable effects on the political and cultural life of many countries. In particular, the collapse of the Eastern bloc has, through the media, been an example for change in many other countries. Cultural imperialism and the threat which it poses to cultural diversity, continues to worry some. The messages the world receives through the medium are currently coming largely from the West, but the growing economic strength of the Asian-Pacific countries (few of which are in the Commonwealth) could bring about a change of focus. Improved communications technology could strengthen Commonwealth links, and particularly aid the work of NGOs. The need was underlined for freedom of information to be added to the Declaration of Commonwealth Principles.

Sir Kenneth Berrill, Pro-Chancellor of the Open University and Chairman of the Commonwealth Equity Fund, was the Conference President.

Delegates to the conference were honoured to be received by **Her Majesty The Queen** and **Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother**, following the service at the Royal Chapel on Sunday 13th June.

Introduction

Geoffrey Williams, Director of Studies at Cumberland Lodge, welcomed participants to the conference and introduced the Conference President, **Sir Kenneth Berrill**. In his introduction, Sir Kenneth spoke of the two areas of communications in which there had been revolutionary changes in our lifetime, physical communications and electronic communications. Physical communication had been revolutionised first by the railways and then by the internal combustion engine and the jet engine, had transformed every country of the world, making our societies much more mobile. Whilst we might anticipate a continuing decrease in journey times, it would seem that truly revolutionary advance in this field might be at an end.

By contrast, the electronic communications revolution was continuing, and has already transformed our political, cultural and business life. Within minutes events taking place in other parts of the world can be

► St Catharine's gratefully acknowledges the support of the **Dulverton Trust** and the **Goldsmiths' Company** in the funding of this conference.

projected into our offices and homes, made possible by developments in computer and satellite technology. Fibre optics offers the next leap forward in a rapidly changing field.

How changes in communications technology might affect the Commonwealth of the future was the focus of the conference: will it bring it closer together or tear it apart? Will it widen or narrow the gap between rich and poor?

1 Communications and Change in Retrospect

Historians, suggested **Andrew Porter**, were developing an interest in the relationship between communications, and especially the technology of communications, and the development of empire. Prominent in this field was the American historian, Daniel Headrick, much of whose work illustrates a traditional theme: that excitement about expansion and technological ingenuity were seen in almost every decade to be characteristic of the age. He highlighted four features: the amazing extension of rail, road and air links; the rapidly increasing speed at which people, goods and information can be conveyed; the increasing reliability of communications, and finally (and perhaps of greatest importance) the increasing cheapness of communications.

Such developments have given us the prospect of 'one world': the increasingly close integration of larger, multi-national states or associations. Modern technology encourages this, Headrick noting that it "does not occur in isolated units, but as complex systems that require ever more widespread interactions and interdependence . . . telecommunications are among the technologies most involved in this process; they are very complex, they readily form systems and networks, and they both require and encourage global interdependence".

It is easy to illustrate the development of technology, but some of the assumptions commonly made about its impact might be queried: that technology makes control and centralisation easier; that its spread can be equated to the march of progress; and that it enhances understanding of other societies.

Assumptions commonly made about the impact of technology might be queried

Firstly, however, whilst modern technological advance has made it possible to envisage and organise global communities, global networks go back much earlier, probably long before people were conscious of them. Thus the roots of the world economy can be traced to the 16th and 17th centuries and epidemics such as the 1918–19 flu epidemic spread world-wide. Intellectually the idea of one world is essential to the Christian tradition and is implicit in the idea of a single creation. It has further roots in the rational scientific approach to the study of the world which dates from the Enlightenment of the mid-18th century, and which has driven us to explore and to classify the things we observe.

The Commonwealth, developing out of an earlier empire, is often seen as illustrating the potential of networks of communication. One of the visionaries in this tradition was the Oxford historian Lionel Curtis who saw in the British Empire of the inter-war years the germ of a world society underpinned by technological advance, British cultural traditions, and the English language. Sir Charles Dilke expressed similar ideas as early as the 1860s, impressed by the extent to which English had become the language of international commerce and the common bond between countries. However, Dilke's vision faded and thirty years later he was writing *The Problems of Greater Britain*. One of the reasons for his disillusionment was disagreement over language. In the early 19th century the idea of a standard English began to develop and became an increasingly intolerant concept as the century progressed, dismissive of dialects, of the transplanted English developing in the settler colonies, and even more of the creole or pidgin variants which had developed in West Africa, the Caribbean and Hong Kong. This lack of agreement on acceptable forms of English, and the prejudices associated with it, have not encouraged closer links.

The question 'Which English?' naturally leads on to 'Whose English?' The potential of English for communication on a world wide scale, suggested Andrew Porter, had been limited because most spoke it as a second or third language and the numbers who had sought to acquire it have been rather few. Only about 15% of the world's population regularly used English, and the figure was steadily going down. Further, many who sought to master it did so for social or prestige reasons, so that it was seen as something which sets people apart from each other and cuts them off from their roots.

Missionaries were amongst the first to realise these problems. Initially they promoted the use of English in preference to 'heathen' vernacular languages, but began to work through the vernaculars when they realised that many were interested in acquiring English not in order that they might be converted, but so that they might obtain employment in commercial offices, or read subversive literature. In the use of the

vernaculars missionaries promoted fragmentation, rather than closer communication.

The use of English as the language of law and government in Britain's colonial territories also provoked resistance and non co-operation from those who saw it as forced anglicisation. This was particularly true of the Afrikaners in South Africa and the French in Quebec.

Some contemporary African novelists such as Chinua Achebe are worried that to write in English constrains their authenticity and the Kenyan novelist Ngugi Wa Thiongo has taken the decision to write no longer in English. Nationalist leaders, of whom Gandhi is an example, used English effectively in their exchanges with the British government, but felt that in doing so they were alienating themselves and collaborating with those who were corrupting their own traditions.

These examples show that use of a particular language can be profoundly alienating and that choice of a language and the availability of education and technology raise fundamental issues of power and control in any society or association. Can those who possess the power to influence access to information, or to educational and technological opportunity, be trusted to exercise that power in any interest but their own?

Governments have welcomed the technological advances which gave improved communication, seeing it as a means of strengthening power and control, although Colonial governors were sometimes able, as in the case of Lord Milner in South Africa, to turn it to their own advantage. In World War II radio was used in British colonial territories to damp down possible unrest and to provide loyalty-inducing programmes. However, the competition from alternative transmitters soon changed this, to the point that Oliver Lyttelton, Colonial Secretary in the early 1950s, complained that improved communications were actually constraining the ability of the imperial government to run its colonies. Increasingly people were made aware of what was going on in other parts of the world and no longer could a blind eye be turned to repression.

Governments will try to control the media, but technology can be used to subvert these centralising tendencies

Thus the lessons to be drawn from the historical record are that governments (and others) will try to control the media, but that technology can be used to subvert these centralising tendencies.

The experience of history is not necessarily going to be repeated, but two themes might give food for thought today: that advances in technology have always gone with optimism and vision, but to a considerable extent that vision has faded quite rapidly; and that the extension of communication is essentially two-sided, capable of both supporting and extending the status quo and of subverting it.

► Challenged in discussion as to the relevance of what he had to say to a Commonwealth which had "transcended its origins", Andrew Porter argued that it was indeed very relevant. Many in Commonwealth countries carry with them a vision of the past which influences their behaviour towards other countries, not least towards Britain, and for this reason it is important to draw attention to some of the ingredients of the historical legacy.

It was noted that different models of the relationship between the media and the state had been exported. In the one, the media was closely linked with the state and government organisations and had limited international credibility. In the other, free market conditions were espoused, but powerful proprietors, advertising, commercial and political interests could wield a pernicious influence.

Taking up the point that in many countries, including India, English was the language of the minority, and noting that countries such as Cameroon and Mozambique, which did not share in its linguistic heritage, were seeking to join the Commonwealth, it was questioned whether we should continue to assume that English would in future hold its dominant position.

Speakers

Professor Shamsher Ali, Vice-Chancellor of the Bangladesh Open University

Sir Kenneth Berrill, Pro-Chancellor of the Open University (Conference President)

Catherine Distler, Assistant Director, PROMETHEE, Paris, an international think tank focussing on the global networked society.

Professor Andrew Porter, Head of the Department of History, King's College London

Ofeibea Quist-Arcton, West Africa Correspondent for the BBC World Service

Elizabeth Smith, Controller English Services, BBC World Service

Peter Unwin, Deputy Secretary-General (Economic) of the Commonwealth, 1989–93

2 A Ten Year Prospect

Taking as her starting point the Declaration of Commonwealth Principles, the Singapore Declaration of 1971, **Elizabeth Smith** noted that it contained no mention of freedom of information. Nor did freedom of information, or of the press, feature in any subsequent communique of Heads of Government Meetings. Yet it did feature in the UN Charter and was the subject of the UN Declaration on Freedom of Information of 1946.

The 1971 Declaration of Commonwealth Principles contains no mention of freedom of information

This is because the issue has been sensitive and divisive to the Commonwealth since the 1960s. It was pushed aside by more immediate areas of disagreement, such as Rhodesia and South Africa. Changes in Southern Africa, along with the end of the Cold War, have radically changed the situation and the Commonwealth now has the opportunity for new initiatives in this area.

It became an issue in the 1960s when developing countries, many within the Commonwealth, came to see Western domination of communication as a factor in their under-development. They felt that the Western media presented developing countries in a negative way and posed threats to their political independence and cultural identity. To counteract this there was a strong movement for a 'New World Order' in information and communication, supported by the Soviet Union. It was opposed by the Western countries, who argued that the New World Order would curtail human rights and the free flow of information, both essential to any sophisticated and civilised society. The dispute culminated in the withdrawal of the USA and Britain, on this and other issues, from UNESCO in 1984.

In the 1960s there was a strong movement for a 'New World Order' in information and communication

The charge of negative bias is still there, but enthusiasm for managed information has gone since images of the people of East Germany tearing down the Berlin Wall went around the world. With their bare hands they were voting against a system which stood for managed information and they have since rejoiced in the new-found freedom and diversity of their media.

So the heart has gone out of the drive for that kind of New World Order, even though individual countries are still determined to control information: this year Nigeria, for example, introduced the death penalty for speaking out against the government. Most Commonwealth countries, however, see free communication as contributing very positively to development. Advanced technology for 'phones and faxes, banking, airline booking, taxation systems, etc., are seen as prerequisites for a modern society, enabling things to be done more efficiently and more cheaply. There is rage when, unable to make the necessary investment, countries see themselves being excluded from the infrastructure essential for sophisticated societies.

The Soviet Union's place as a rôle model for the developing countries has been taken by the Asian-Pacific countries, notably Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan and southern parts of China, which have the fastest growing communications industries. There is still objection to cultural dominance, but new ways are being found to use the new technologies in 'culturally appropriate' ways. Many non-Latin scripts have been developed for computers and internationally understood symbols are increasingly used in computer commands. There is also a growing understanding of people's ability to operate in more than one culture simultaneously, handling complex relationships in different areas and languages, and under different sorts of constraints.

Elizabeth Smith did not believe that English was a language in decline. Chinese had more first language speakers, but if second language speakers were also counted, English came out first. Because so many were already using it, it would become even more dominant: there had been a phenomenal explosion of English in Russia and Eastern Europe.

It is no longer a language owned by Britain, and with the development of a variety of indigenous forms elsewhere, 'English English' has become a minority form. It is an enormous advantage that by an accident of history the Commonwealth has the linguistic skills necessary to operate in the language of computers, aviation, diplomacy, etc. — skills which the countries of the former Soviet Union are trying to acquire in hard and expensive ways.

Commonwealth countries will also benefit from the leap-frogging of technologies. For example, satellite television transmission is vastly cheaper than terrestrial systems. Currently it is used mainly by international broadcasters (BBC World Service Television, for example, now reaches the whole of Asia from China through to the Mediterranean using just two satellites), and with levels of investment much less than for terrestrial broadcasting, it can be developed for national services.

In this new world of satellite TV, a degree of cultural dominance is undoubtedly present, but as more countries begin to transmit internationally, this will not last. In future we will be receiving in our homes hundreds of channels in many languages.

Tying aid to human rights has had a major impact and there is scope for tying it also to press freedom

These are developments that Commonwealth countries should welcome, and the Commonwealth as an organisation is now in a position to take a much firmer stand on the issue of freedom of information. It needs more funding, though; its small media development fund (£200,000 annually) and the £650,000 it spends on information and communications are a fraction of the £23 million which the EC spends in these areas. Tying aid to human rights has had a major impact and there is scope for tying it also to press freedom.

The most vulnerable link in the chain of free information is the individual journalist, who can be harassed, bullied, imprisoned and executed. Organisations like Amnesty International are active, but the Commonwealth too can apply pressures in defence of threatened individuals or organisations, and might create a Free Media Support Fund. The high proportion of the media directed aid which goes into training is a reflection of the divided views of the past; the time has come for change.

Might we consider a Commonwealth Nobel-type prize for the bravest individual journalist, the one who did most for press freedom in a particular year? It could provide an income and a status for life and would be an example that there are some things which you cannot do without the rest of the world taking action.

Without free and efficient communications it is impossible to have a sophisticated and fair society

Technology is bringing down the cost of communication of all sorts — printing, TV and radio, fax and phones, computers and modems — and lower cost means more choice, more freedom. As the Asian-Pacific countries have shown, if the economic growth is there, any country can invest in modern communications. Without free and efficient communications it is impossible to have a sophisticated and fair society. It is something behind which the Commonwealth should put its weight.

▶ Whether the new communication technologies could narrow the gap between the developed and developing countries was a major issue of discussion: many felt that the speaker had been too optimistic. The new technology was providing cheap ways of acquiring and processing information within organisations, but gaining access to large markets and reaching mass audiences still required enormous investment. Whilst the advantages of electronic networking and computer data bases were extolled by some, they could benefit only a few. In many Commonwealth countries only a very small fraction of the population even had access to a telephone and phone systems were often overloaded and unreliable. Should we not first invest in upgrading basic infrastructure?

The consequences for countries not able to keep pace with the technological explosion were serious. In his book *Future Shock* (1970), Alvin Tofler had spoken of the 'culture shock' of people unable to adapt to this new technological world, because they had not got the basic understanding, the education, or the inclination to cope with it. He saw a world divided between copers and non-copers, and this could apply to countries.

To enable developing countries to keep abreast of these developments required money but events of the 1960s and 1970s had made aid organisations reluctant to be involved in this field; some (eg. CIDA, the Canadian aid agency), were reorientating their activities to focus on the countries of Eastern Europe. Similarly, the Commonwealth Secretariat was unlikely to be able to spend more in this area at a time when its budget was under attack. Overall, there was not much optimism that the new technology would enable the poorer countries of the Commonwealth to narrow the gap.

The consequences for countries not able to keep pace with the technological explosion are serious

Would the cheapening of technology really lessen the media cultural bias, particularly in TV? The current trend, towards a greater concentration of power, would not be helpful. Others thought the notion of cultural bias suspect, and pointed to the strength of the Indian film industry and the use of new communication forms to promote a diversity of messages.

There was support for a proposal that the Singapore Declaration should be revised to include a provision that free information should be a basic human right throughout the Commonwealth.

Figure 1

PROMETHEE defines a network as "a set of technical means, *infrastructures*, and strategic norms, *infostructures*, that actors with rights of access can take the initiative to mobilise as means to set up and manage value-adding relationships."

The word 'relationship' is very important: the technologies allow people and institutions to relate to each other and to interact. The situation may be shown diagrammatically (Fig 1). The network is made possible by technology, which provides the *infrastructure*; the rules which govern its use provide the *infostructure*; and the initiatives and strategies which develop from its use establish an *infoculture*.

3 Instantaneous Information in World-Wide Business

Catherine Distler explained that the think tank PROMETHEE, for which she works, was mainly interested in the impact of information and electronic networks on corporate strategies, markets, and international economic integration.

Goods, people, money and information are the four main flows linking different parts of the world. In the 1970s, although there was much debate about interdependence, in fact this concept covered mainly the trading of goods. Finance, transportation and communications were seen essentially as supporting activities — what might be called 'the world's back office'.

By the early 1980s international negotiations were trying to address the reality of the ever-growing importance of the trade in services, but the position remained essentially traditional, with on the one side the trade in goods and on the other the trade in services.

Today we have a different situation in which corporations are managing global networks which manage simultaneously flows of goods, people, money and information. A good example is the airline industry, where networks pass information about ticketing, reservations, payments and passenger movements on a global basis. There are networks of all sorts, from the computer reservation network to the Open University network, and even the old boy network, but we need to understand what is common to all of them. The Western World tends to emphasise the technological dimension of networks, but PROMETHEE is more interested in the type of strategy that develops along them. Apart from technology and strategy, there are rules, developed by Western corporations or countries to fit their own needs, which developing countries have little choice other than to accept.

The global effect of these networks is to move from the traditional industrial revolution type economy to something which might be called the network economy (Fig 2). The industrial revolution brought in mass production: maximising the number of items produced and lowering the price. The utility of the product is less than if it were customised, but as the price is low, it is a good deal.

The global effect is to move from the traditional industrial revolution type economy to the network economy

With the networked economy one can offer both a low price and a customised product. In Japan, the Nissan car company, for example, can offer 15,000 different models, although many are not produced. The customer can choose the car type, features, colour etc, and can take delivery within eight days of doing so. Another international company, Benetton has sales information arriving daily from their retail outlets so they will send, for example, to New York only clothes in the style,

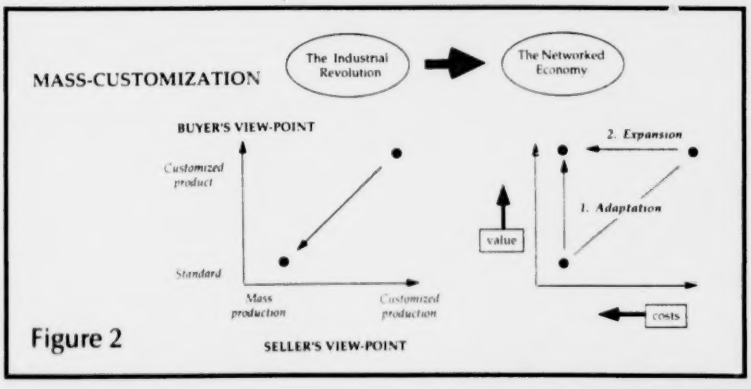

Figure 2

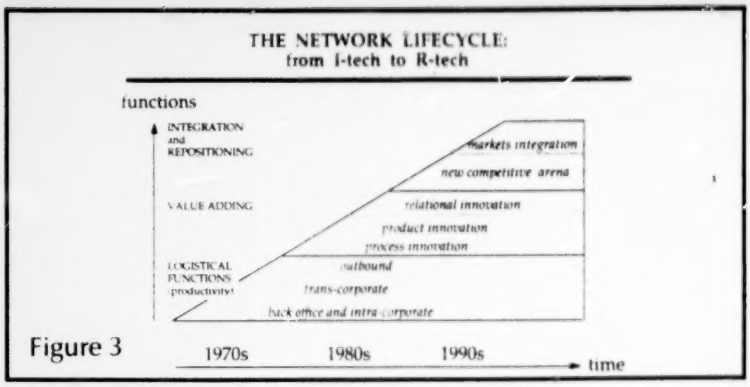

Figure 3

colours and sizes that they know are selling in New York at that time.

PROMETHEE suggests that corporations are developing four different types of network to manage internal and external relationships: in the *Intra-corporate Network* information is managed at the level of the company, as in computer integrated manufacturing; at the *Trans-corporate* level links are developed between independent institutions, mainly using electronic data exchange — as in the case of Benetton. *Inter-corporate networks* occur when alliances, or joint venture activities develop between otherwise independent entities. *Meta-corporate networks* occur when a large number of separate organisations come together, often to try to modify the environment in which they work: many business organisations are of this nature. Companies may develop all of these networks, holding them in portfolio and comparing the advantages of one with another.

A network life cycle may be suggested (Fig. 3). When corporations first develop information networks their main target is productivity gains. This, however, is just the beginning because the introduction of information technology can change not only the logistics of the corporation, but the type of innovation it will be able to develop and the nature of the market. In those cases information technology translates into relationship management technology, what PROMETHEE calls R–tech. First the corporation can capitalise on these technologies to produce what is sold rather than sell what has been produced. It is also possible to propose new products (product innovation) which would not have been possible without information technologies. In a further stage, the company might propose new types of interactions to the final customer, perhaps cutting out intermediaries; or they may merge markets at one time seen as different.

Travel and tourism was the first sector to experience the impact of networks. Computer reservation systems were introduced in the early 1970s for internal purposes but they have been developed considerably since then. They have enabled established airlines to compete with price cutting new entrants such as People's Express by offering more flights and improved reservation systems. The efficiency of reservation systems, allowing the companies to optimise the number of seats sold for each flight, is critical in a sector as competitive as the airline industry. Continual improvements in productivity are possible by adding new functionalities to networks. To survive, a company must have entry to these networks, and at a global level only the biggest do.

In the distribution field the main impact of networks was not on productivity, but on relationships with suppliers. For example, at one time it was impossible for major distributors to handle produce which was saleable for only three or four days after picking, because it could take that long to get it onto the shelves. Electronic data exchange between producers and distributors now makes it possible to get it onto the shelves in just one day, although it helps to have a source of supply which is geographically close. More generally, the distribution system in France has been able to make a quick strategic response to the current economic depression by offering less expensive types of goods.

The main point is that the relationship between suppliers and distributors has radically changed. No more do suppliers supply what they want and distributors distribute what they can get. Rather a partnership has developed in which suppliers are advised of the product types which are selling and which will be acceptable.

In the 1970s the developing countries were promoting a New World Order that would have been less unfair to them than the prevailing one. Today the problem is not to change the rules of the international economy but not to be left out by an integration trend based on information and electronic networks: networks which can be used as tools of exclusion and barriers to protect markets.

Networks can be used as tools of exclusion

► The likely impact of network development on the developing countries was a theme running through the discussion. Networks had the potential to allow producers in these countries to communicate quickly with the main markets, but there were features of the network based economy not in their interest. For many, low cost labour was one

of the few production advantages they could offer, but this was better adapted to mass production, not mass customisation. A high degree of supplier efficiency and flexibility was now required and this put a premium on the education and training of the labour force, as well as tight delivery schedules. A considerable investment in technology was required, both to operate as a supplier within the network and to produce goods of the requisite standard and specification.

Entry into these networks and the development of the rules which govern their operation was controlled by the Western World, and countries and organisations which did not have network access are disadvantaged. It was suggested that there is a link between the development of networks and the growing proportion of international trade which takes place within multinational corporations.

4 Education in the Commonwealth: New Ways to Deliver?

The educational challenge for the Commonwealth, suggested **Professor Shamsher Ali**, was that a large section of its population was illiterate, and of those who were literate, only very few could be considered scientifically literate. Yet we were just seven years from the start of the 21st century, which is going to witness unprecedented advances in science and technology.

Although education is today the common denominator of all development problems, its key position in the development process should have been recognised long ago. Today poverty, illiteracy and under-development are part of a vicious circle: countries are poor because its peoples are uneducated, they are uneducated because proper investment has not been made in education, because they are poor . . . At the same time, we have never been better placed, thanks to developments in science and technology, to break these vicious circles.

Unfortunately, the new communications technology is being used primarily by the entertainment community and the business world

Thanks to the discovery of the transistor in 1948, we have now reached the stage where the electronic assembly density has reached one third of that of the cells in the human brain. Unfortunately, the new communications technology is being used primarily by the entertainment community and the business world and its potential has not been fully exploited to spread education.

Although countries such as Britain had used information technology in the educational field, an effort should be made, suggested Professor Ali, to identify great teachers and use them globally. This need not result in a 'one way traffic' because teachers of this quality are to be found in both poor and rich countries, and Commonwealth countries have the advantage that English is so widely used. Nor should it result in cultural infiltration; in any case, should we be quite so concerned about cultural influences in educational programmes when pop figures like Madonna and Michael Jackson reign supreme on a global and trans-cultural basis?

A note of caution is necessary about computers, which should not be used in a way which denies the capabilities of the human brain: we should be able to say when they should, or should not, be used.

It is also necessary to underline the importance of non-formal education, which takes place in the areas of health and hygiene, nutrition, and the environment. It does not come from a textbook, but it is the area in which peoples of the Commonwealth would benefit most.

The new technologies also need to be used more effectively to promote understanding between peoples. In the case of his own country, Bangladesh, although images of flooding and poverty were common, there was a lack of appreciation of how these things came about and just how interdependent the world had become. Until the energy crisis of the 1970s the Western World, and particularly America, had used energy resources at a rate which would have used up all our oil reserves before we were far into the 21st century. It is said that this energy is used in 'development' but one might legitimately ask, development for what? It has not simply satisfied the basic necessities of life but has offered luxuries to a favoured sector of the world population. The result has been environmental pollution and countries such as Bangladesh are paying the price. Worse is to come, as the greenhouse effect develops and sea levels rise. Life styles must be changed in order to promote sustainable development, and it is ironic that this is being asked of the developing, rather than the developed, countries.

There is wisdom in asking the developing countries not to copy the lifestyles of the West, but rather to aim at a simpler, more sustainable way of life. At the same time the West should be asked to change a lifestyle which is depleting the planet's

resources and poisoning its atmosphere — but this is not the message that we hear. The days are long gone when one sector of the world population could say 'this is our land, our resources and we will do what we like with them'; it is now recognised that the air, water and soil systems of the earth have complex interrelationships and we must collaborate in their use. We can only do so if public consciousness of the problems of the human family and its environment are generated globally. To do this, Professor Ali suggested that an educational course on 'Planet Earth and its Peoples' needed to be introduced in schools at the secondary level, using all the audio-visual tools at our disposal. The Commonwealth Human Ecology Council should also be strengthened.

The speaker ended with a quotation from the 17th Century poet John Donne:

> *No man is an island, entire of itself, every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*

► The usefulness of 'great teachers' in distance learning programmes was questioned. Those experienced in the field suggested that the quality of the programmes was dependent more on teamwork, and that a range of skills were involved, organisational and editorial as well as teaching. Indeed, it was suggested that people recognised to be great teachers were often so idiosyncratic as to stand outside the formal system of education.

Professor Ali had called for improved environmental education but was not environmental education so well developed in the schools that school children were often far more knowledgeable about these issues than their parents? The problem was that environmental issues were not high on the political agenda and there was not time to wait until those currently going through the schools had taken over positions of political authority. Might the Commonwealth have a rôle in helping to ensure that environmental issues featured higher in the political agenda?

5 Public Attitudes, Policy and Pluralism

Based in Abidjan, **Ofeibea Quist-Arcton**, the BBC's West Africa correspondent, covers 23 countries from Zaire to Mauritania, but excluding the giant of the region, Nigeria (which is served by a BBC Correspondent based in Lagos). She focussed on this area in her presentation.

Working for a high profile international media organisation like the BBC has its pluses and minuses. Her work as a reporter/journalist might seem to be uncomplicated, but in the field it could be of unbelievable complexity.

In the past four years many Commonwealth and other nations in Africa have emerged from the more than three decades of predominantly military or autocratic leadership which followed independence. The media in Africa played a leading rôle in trying to sweep away dictatorships or one-party régimes, becoming part of the democratisation process. It often provided the only alternative source of information to the official communique, and became a target for repression. Thus in Kenya, Cameroon, Zaire and Togo the media is seen as the opposition, the problem, and therefore the enemy. Even in London and Paris, friends of these old-style régimes help to put pressure on international broadcasters/journalists generally.

Press censorship and tampering with the truth was the established way for African governments, using a state controlled press, radio and television. This is changing slowly, but other dubious practices remain. For example, glossy magazines on Africa published in Europe — what the French call 'publi-reportages' — run picture features on African leaders, who clearly pay highly for the privilege, but provide little real information (which is often biased or partisan).

The British government ban on direct reporting of the IRA has not helped

With a long tradition of government intervention in the media, it is not easy for foreign news media reporters to convince government officials and others that they are not subject to British or other Western government pressure or interference. Ofeibea Quist-Arcton has the added problem that as an African she is frequently accused of being a 'traitor', working for a foreign power and wishing to portray Africa in a bad light.

The British government ban on direct reporting on the IRA has not helped, particularly when the BBC gives air time to the 'rebels' of other countries. This ban, and what was widely seen as US manipulation of reporting in the Gulf War, are examples of Western double standards frequently cited by African states accused of muzzling the press.

For many years journalism was locked in a propaganda straight jacket in Africa and reporters did

what they were told. Dissenters courted danger; some lost their jobs, others were killed. In 1991 a survey recorded 267 attacks against journalists in Africa. With this legacy it is not surprising that with the push for democracy there should be an explosion of passionately and deeply anti-government publications, some of questionable independence and in their own way as negative and repressive as the official media they were pitted against. This opposition press was a disappointment to Ofeibea Quist-Arcton, although she conceded that 'things take time'. However, this excuse could not be made for Nigeria, a country with an exceptionally robust and vibrant press. In May, the military government of General Ibrahim Bababangida issued a broadly-worded but sweeping decree advocating the death sentence for people who are deemed to "threaten the public peace".

Unfortunately, despite multi-party elections, state control of the media is still a feature of most countries and access to radio and television is often difficult for opposition leaders. The Commonwealth could play a key rôle in helping to develop the independent media.

Despite multi-party elections, state control of the media is still a feature of most countries

The issue of balanced reporting is a difficult one. At the La Baule Franco-African summit in 1990, François Mitterrand linked future French aid to good governance: respect for human rights, honest, accountable and transparent government, and an end to one-party régimes. It was a policy subsequently taken up by Britain. Unfortunately the opposition in various countries interpreted this as support for them, putting pressure on international journalists to take their side. African governments, forced into a defensive position, blame these same journalists for reporting a disturbance when there was a news blackout on the incident in the local media, whilst the opposition, which often has unrealistic expectations of the international media, may exaggerate the numbers involved, or killed, in the protest, and are incensed when the correct figures are reported.

Another problem is that listeners often choose to hear what they want to hear, which makes for obvious problems when you are trying to report both sides of an issue. Similarly, a report qualified by the caution that it has yet to be confirmed by independent sources, is often accepted as fact. As broadcasts on the BBC, Radio France Internationale or Deutsche Welle are considered 'gospel', this is a problem. The government, or the opposition, whichever received the unfavourable report, see you as having been 'bought' by the other side, not as doing your job properly and reporting all the elements of the story.

Nevertheless, the influence of international broadcasting and news reporting can be enormous. Often the only source of 'reliable' information, it becomes almost a moral authority and their reporters are seen as opinion makers.

The immediacy of the new communications technology has revolutionised reporting, especially the satellite phone, telex and fax for the radio reporters, and satellite TV, which allowed Africans to witness events in Eastern Europe, hastening change in Africa itself.

The immediacy of the new communications technology has revolutionised reporting

But these things can also be abused and the satellite phone has allowed the likes of Charles Taylor in Liberia, Mano Dayak of the Tuareg rebels in Niger, Jonas Savimbi in Angola, and Foday Sankoh in Sierra Leone, to get on the airwaves in a matter of minutes to promote their guerrilla wars. Taylor, for example, could declare himself to be at the battle front, whilst in reality speaking from the comfort of a hotel room in Burkina Faso or the Ivory Coast. In Chad, President Idriss Deby claimed that he was able to march on the capital Ndjamena without much resistance from the forces of the ousted President Hissene Habre because, some say, they had followed his blow-by-blow progress on Radio France Internationale and were therefore demoralised and easily neutralised. In instances of this sort journalists may be helping the 'wrong' people, or unwittingly be seen to be taking sides.

Somalia is another and shameful example. The landing of the US marines at Mogadishu saw an unprecedented display of communications technology, shipped and installed at enormous expense for the media circus in a country torn apart by war and lacking electricity, a functioning government or infrastructure. Never had any country in Africa received such intense, round-the-clock media coverage, yet despite this it did not lead to any benefit for the Somalis or a better understanding of the Somalia conflict. Instead, it was a political propaganda coup, titillating rather than educating.

Related to this is the complaint that the BBC concentrates too much on bad news in Africa: wars,

drought, famine, Aids, etc. The charge is true to an extent, and the ideal should be media which are also educating people about the values of a good society. It is not difficult to find news stories which reflect well on the community, throwing light on the many who are simply getting on with their lives in Africa, and which make compelling listening and viewing. But no-one, suggested Ofeibea Quist-Arcton, would have thanked her if she had been away reporting the success of a small-scale cassava project in the Gambia and had missed the June massacre in Liberia.

► Questioned further about the rôle of the media in the transition to democracy in Africa, the speaker said that although people were impressed by dramatic events in Eastern Europe, particularly the fall of Nicolae Ceausescu, the Romanian dictator, the movement towards change in Africa was already evident. Eastern Europe was an example and an encouragement, rather than a trigger, showing that people power could change things. She thought the democratisation movement would not be reversed, although the process was proving to be particularly difficult in a few African countries. The Commonwealth could help by encouraging member states to put pressure on those states which continued to repress their citizens.

In countries without reliable information sources, the BBC World Service played a crucial rôle and carried an enormous responsibility. We tended to underestimate people's hunger for information in such circumstances. The influence of international broadcasting would become even greater as satellite TV becomes more readily available. The technology would become cheaper and even poor people were likely to make sacrifices to obtain it.

6 The Commonwealth of Conscience and Emulation

The question which came to his mind, said **Peter Unwin**, after two days' talking about the medium, was 'What is the message?'.

We have talked about the medium, but the question is, what is the message?

Clearly, in our complex world an almost infinitely varied range of messages were being transmitted at any one time, but in the socio-political area he thought that there were perhaps five main ones:

- the message of socialism, out of fashion but for which obituaries were perhaps premature;
- the East Asian message of firmly directed development;
- the message of fundamentalism, whether from the Middle East or the Mid-West;
- the message of the marginalised: poverty, disaster, hunger, chaos and despair; and lastly
- the Christian democratic and capitalist message of pluralism, accountability and human rights.

Within the Commonwealth at the present time it is the latter two which are being most loudly transmitted. In crude caricature, the message of the marginalised arouses compassion, although it can arouse cynicism, whilst the message of the Europeans and North Americans tends to arouse emulation.

On the whole the messages producing compassion and emulation are achieving desirable, if not always adequate, results. Compassion, for example, produces commitment, but insufficient commitment to things such as development assistance, the relief of distress, and mediation when things go wrong. Emulation is producing a growing, if hesitant, commitment to development as distinct from development assistance, and in turn development produces a commitment to pluralism, accountability and human rights.

There is, however, a danger that these things can go wrong. Thus in Somalia frustrated compassion is leading us dangerously close to neo- or re-colonisation. Or the sight of so many starving people on television can lead to compassion fatigue.

Emulation, too, can produce bad as well as good reactions: the pluralistic chaos of the former Yugoslavia is an example. Emulation of the North could bring to countries of the South old fashioned and crude forms of capitalist exploitation, leading to human and environmental abuse. In particular there could be the loss of human and social qualities, seen as incompatible with development, wealth, and capitalist success. Emulation of things which cannot be achieved can also lead to envy, loss of contentment and innocence; even violence.

Recognising that there could be drawbacks, Peter Unwin nevertheless felt that the world was better for having stimulated both compassion and emulation, although we need to strive to keep the balance favourable.

The situation is in fact more complex than the bi-polar World model (a rich, perhaps guilty North and a poor, perhaps desperate South) might suggest. The fifty countries of the Commonwealth approach their relationship not just from two levels of development, the industrialised and the developing, but from a range of very different cultural, historical, moral and organisational backgrounds. There is also need to accept the likelihood that messages so far passed over in silence might emerge to compete with the messages of the marginalised and of the Europeans and the North Americans.

It would be facile to imagine that the socialist message is dead

For example, it would be facile to imagine that the socialist message, which in its beginnings was pre-eminently a message of compassion, is dead. It has been discredited by a mixture of political abuse and economic failure, but it would be short-sighted to assume that it will not re-enter the debate. Already there are signs of a reaction away from market and individualist strategies towards ones which have a concern for society rather than the individual.

We may not understand the message of fundamentalism, but we cannot ignore it

Fundamentalism, too, whether from the Middle East or the Mid West, we can only write-off at our peril. We may not understand the message, but we cannot ignore it. It will certainly grow, and it may bring benefits, as well as the dangers we fear.

Perhaps the most relevant of these other messages is that of 'firmly directed development' coming out of the Far East and South East Asia. Spectacular growth figures have been achieved in countries which challenge the notion that material development is inseparable from pluralism and individual freedom. If Europe and North America fall behind, there will be a switch in emulation towards Asia.

Concluding, Peter Unwin suggested that compassion and emulation were proving to be useful and positive forces, although both have the capacity to turn sour. Nor do they reflect the rich diversity of the Commonwealth. Other messages

Reports of Discussion Groups

There were two main foci of discussion:--

1. ***Would the revolution in communications technology increase or diminish the gap between poor and rich nations, and between rich and poor in developing countries?***

Present trends suggested that it would increase rather then decrease disparities. Suggestions to reverse this included:—

- Putting more emphasis on human resource development to help countries cope with the demands of modern communications technology.
- Seeking improved access to information networks, especially in trade and business. Multinationals operating confidential networks had a particular advantage in developing countries.
- Encouraging organisations such as The Technology Exchange Ltd., which disseminate information about new and relevant technologies; and the Commonwealth Consultative Group on Technology Management in the Science and Technology Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat.
- Giving more emphasis to understanding, integrating and developing technologies for local use.

2. ***How might the new technology be used to make the Commonwealth a more cohesive body?***

The basis for closer Commonwealth co-operation lay in the shared use of the English language and the continuation and reinforcement of a range of professional and associational ties. In this respect the NGOs played a vital rôle and should be generating ideas and spearheading action to keep abreast of the new technology. They could help in identifying the appropriate technology, or mix of technologies, which would yield optimum results in a local context. They should be networking more effectively between themselves and should seek to optimise their potential by being more specific in their objectives and avoiding duplication of effort. In seeking funding, more thought should be given to their own revenue raising activities (e.g., through the generation and sale of information databases). A review of intellectual property laws would be useful to facilitate access to databases.

The desirability of working towards a Commonwealth declaration supporting freedom of expression was underlined. It was pointed out that education in its broadest sense was a vital factor in ensuring the growth of freedom of expression.

already exist which are likely to grow in attractiveness.

How does this relate to the medium, which is becoming ever more advanced, spreading more widely, more quickly, more cheaply and more effectively? There is an increasing demand on people's brains, rather than on the machinery which they use, to ensure that the message they put into the media is right in itself, and persuasively and appropriately formulated to reflect an understanding of the recipient. In this way we can talk about a Commonwealth and messages within it which are not one-way assertions, but part of a multi-way dialogue in an enormously complicated, culturally, historically, socially rich variety of nations.

► Discussion focussed on the messages of fundamentalism and firmly directed development.

If the economic strength of the Asian-Pacific countries continued to grow at present rates, they could replace Europe and North America as a focus of emulation. Unfortunately just a few Commonwealth countries — Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei — formed part of this group.

The Asian-Pacific countries could replace Europe and North America as a focus of emulation

The West had stressed the necessary association of capitalist development and liberal political attitudes, and there was concern that these Asian countries were developing advanced capitalist societies with essentially autocratic political structures. In a defence of the situation in Singapore, it was suggested that there was a mind set about 'so-called Western values'. Immense improvements in the standard of living and the quality of the environment were played down because of the high degree of regulation of its society. It highlighted the debate on the extent to which the rights of the individual should be upheld, sometimes at the expense of society as a whole.

The need to preserve our cultural diversity is equally pressing

It was regretted that the word 'fundamental' had in recent years been used in a new and misleading way. Even so, we should not too readily accept the notion that fundamentalism was necessarily corrosive of democratic attitudes. It was suggested that the capitalist free market philosophy was amongst the most dangerous of the fundamentalist attitudes of our time. Western and essentially consumer-based, its effect on the media was to drown out other perspectives.

The Canadians were developing a Global Access TV Network to compete with CNN and the consumer-based commercial services in an effort to enfranchise independent producers in minority and developing countries. The world had accepted the need for biodiversity but the need to preserve our cultural diversity was equally pressing and could be a casualty to the explosion of communications technology. The Commonwealth, which throughout its history has emphasised the value of diversity, should take the lead in challenging such a development.

7 Concluding Address

Major changes, said the Conference President, **Sir Kenneth Berrill**, bring good and bad effects and in analysing these effects there are pessimists and optimists. As far as the communications and information technology revolution were concerned, he was an optimist.

He accepted that the change to a customised product, highly dependent on close links between the producer and the market, which Catherine Distler had described, would affect large manufacturers such as Nissan, but he did not think that it would spread through all levels of industry or significantly affect the industry of developing countries.

Another projection was that the new technology would produce an enclave effect, its use restricted to certain sections of the population, thus producing an even more divisive situation in developing countries. Economic development, he suggested, was always patchy, but if its effect was to speed up economic growth it was probably 'a good thing'.

By contrast, its effect on the infrastructure was wholly good. To have an efficient economy, a country needs a decent telephone and fax system and providing these things could now be done comparatively cheaply. Computer power has reduced the cost of this technology to such an extent that what had cost the equivalent of a Rolls Royce 15 years ago was the cost of a bicycle today. For a developing country this aspect of its infrastructure can be modernised much more cheaply than ever before.

This does not mean that the IT revolution is the answer to economic development. In earlier years we were told that such development would depend on a decent educational structure, or a transport system, or a revolution in agriculture. The truth is that none of these will create economic

development on their own, and indeed, in some places it will not occur even when they are all present. But if it happens in the right place you can get a speed of development that could not have been foreseen — as is happening in parts of eastern China today.

Turning to the political and cultural effects, he thought it was a little odd that at the conference everybody talked of television only in the context of the news, ignoring the fact that many sought television primarily for the entertainment it offered. He accepted that there was cultural imperialism and that value free reporting, or ethic- and culture-free broadcasting, simply did not exist. However, every day more channels were opening up, local and international, and as the number grows, so would the diversity.

People could see the old régimes in Eastern Europe toppled by people power, and that made the chances of a return to dictatorships in other parts of the world very much less likely

In the sense that people now had access to television and radio broadcasting from a great many countries, the skies were open, and that must be beneficial. That people could see the old régimes in Eastern Europe toppled by people power made the chances of a permanent return to dictatorships in other parts of the world very much less likely, and this was indeed a major advance.

There were dangers — the media could be used to mislead (as in Liberia), or to trivialise (as in Somalia). Nor should we be too quick to impose our values on the press of other countries: our press may be free, but it is not always very nice, or very balanced.

In terms of education, the impact of the IT revolution was disappointing. Certainly the younger generation were rapidly becoming computer literate and there had been useful applications in distance learning. But it had not produced the great leap forward, giving cheap and effective education, comparable to the impact that it had had on business and the media.

There was lastly the Commonwealth dimension: how could we apply these changes to the Commonwealth? The use of English as a common language, the informal style of operation and the long history of professional and other associations were all characteristics which fitted comfortably into the changes and possibilities brought about by the communications revolution.

In terms of education, the impact of the IT revolution is disappointing

But there are difficulties: for many countries, particularly the larger, the Commonwealth connection is of lesser importance than their immediate regional associations. There is also the problem that the Commonwealth Secretariat does not have the resources necessary to implement effective policy.

Turning to the title of the conference: can the communications revolution achieve a closer Commonwealth, and can we do anything to help it do so?

Sir Kenneth felt that there was no reason to believe that improved communications would increase divisions between large and small, between North and South. In any case, these technological developments were unstoppable.

The inclusion of freedom of information in a declaration of Commonwealth Principles is crucial

To help, it had been suggested that countries should be able to call upon expert advice, not only about the technology and the data and network systems on offer, but also to guide policy making. Governments also needed to be persuaded to increase freedom of information, and the inclusion of freedom of information in a declaration of Commonwealth Principles would be crucial to this. A prize for journalistic independence within the Commonwealth was a helpful suggestion, as was the appeal for a Commonwealth programme to promote education and training in the new technology, particularly for those in the media.

In sum, Sir Kenneth said, he was an optimist believing that the communications revolution would speed economic development, that it would not increase the divisions between North and South, and that there were many valuable side effects, particularly in 'opening the skies' to increased entertainment and information. Unfortunately the expectations of many were too high, whilst change always worried some people, but this should not distract from the benefits they were undoubtedly capable of achieving.

Conference report by Geoffrey Williams

PARTICIPANTS

Gordon Adam, Project Manager (Education), BBC World Service; **Professor Shamsher Ali**, Vice-Chancellor, The Bangladesh Open University; **Saqeba Ali**, Teacher in Tower Hamlets, London; **Dame Jocelyn Barrow**, Deputy Chairperson, Broadcasting Standards Council; **Sir Kenneth Berrill**, Pro-Chancellor of the Open University; **Lady Berrill**; **Eric Bertram**, Postgraduate student, Centre for Journalism Studies, University of Wales College of Cardiff (Canada); **Anwar Bhayat**, UK Representative, Mauritius Labour Party; **Dr Oliver Boyd-Barrett**, Sub-Dean, School of Education, The Open University; **David Broad**, Head, Commonwealth Co-ordination Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office; **Sheila Browne**, UK Representative, Commonwealth of Learning Review Body; **William Crawley**, Head of the Eastern Service, BBC World Service; **Graham Cunneld**, General Secretary, Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation; **Zena Daysh**, Executive Vice-Chairman, Commonwealth Human Ecology Council; **Catherine Distler**, Assistant Director, PROMETHEE, Paris; **Philippe Distler**, Chief Engineer, *Centre Nationale d'Etudies des Télécommunications*, Paris; **Cheryl Dorall**, Assistant Director of Information, Commonwealth Secretariat; **Ivan Fernandez**, Associate Editor, Singapore Press Holdings Ltd and Press Fellow, Wolfson College, Cambridge; **Shila Fernandez**, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore: **Christopher Hull**, Doctoral student of history, University of Toronto; **Derek Ingram**, Editor-in-Chief, Gemini News Service, London; **Nazira Ismail**, Data and Communications Officer, International Centre for Distance Learning, The Open University; **Satish Jacob**, BBC Reporter, Delhi, India; **Dr Hamayun Khan**, Director of the Commonwealth Foundation; **Dr Peter Lyon**, Academic Secretary and Reader in International Relations, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London; **Roger McNally**, Deputy Director, Diplomatic Academy of London; **Nick Manning**, Chief Project Officer, Management Development Programme, Commonwealth Secretariat; **Sir Peter Marshall**, President of Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford, and Trustee of St Catharine's; **Professor Robert Martin**, Faculty of Law, University of Western Ontario and Secretary-Treasurer of the Commonwealth Association for Education in Journalism and Communication; **Lord Moore of Wolvercote**, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, St Catharine's; **Crispin Mwanza**, Deputy News Editor, Zambia News Agency; **Dr David Nostbakken**, Executive Director, WETV — Global Access Television Service, IDRC, Ottawa; **Janis Nostbakken**, Writer, specialising in children's books and programmes; **Dr Shem Ochuodho**, Senior Lecturer, Institute of Computer Science, University of Nairobi; **Brian Padgett**, Managing Director, The Technology Exchange Ltd., Silsoe; **Professor Andrew Porter**, Head, Department of History, King's College London; **Sajda Qureshi**, Co-ordinator of COMNET-IT at the Commonwealth Secretariat; **Ofeibea Quist-Arcton**, West Africa Correspondent for the BBC World Service; **Stuart Revill**, Secretary-General, Commonwealth Broadcasting Association; **Bernadette Robinson**, Director, International Extension College, London; **Sugeeswara Sendahira**, *Sunday Observer*, Colombo, and Press Fellow at Wolfson College, Cambridge; **Richard Simpson**, Director/Assistant Vice-President for Technology, Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver; **Sharita Singh**, Fiji Broadcasting Commission and postgraduate student at the Centre for Journalism studies, University of Wales, College of Cardiff; **Elizabeth Smith**, Controller, English Services, BBC World Service; **John Stevenson**, Assistant to the Director-General, The Commonwealth Institute; **Peter Unwin**, Commonwealth Deputy Secretary General (Economic), 1989–93; **Monica Unwin**, Assistant Director, Alzheimer's Disease Society; **Christa Veile**, Conference Co-ordinator, St Catharine's; **Dr Geoffrey Williams**, Director of Studies, St Catharine's; **Gillian Woolven**, Head of Documentation and Information at the Association of Commonwealth Universities; **Nerun Yacub**, Assistant Editor, *Bangladesh Times*, and Fellow with the Reuter Foundation Programme, Green College, Oxford; **Leon Yow**, Honorary Treasurer of the Organisation of Commonwealth Associations and Development Director of New Life.

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